

Kennedy and the Intellectuals

By Sidney Hertzberg

Immediately after the assassination of President Kennedy, Hertzberg, as editor of Current magazine, published the reactions of a group of intellectuals, mainly historians. He asked these and other intellectuals for their evaluations of Kennedy 10 years later.

THE RESPONSE to the assassination of President Kennedy 10 years ago dramatized a momentous and hopeful fact of modern political life: that a leader whose hallmark was an intelligent interest in ideas could yet move great masses of people throughout the world.

Men of the mind claimed this fact as a precious legacy whatever they thought of the policies and actions his intelligence nurtured. Revisited 10 years later, intellectuals still cling to this legacy. But, being intellectuals, they agree on little else.

The contrast between the spirit (more than style) and the measurable substance of the Kennedy administration explains many of the conflicting interpretations of it.

On the whole, Kennedy's defenders do not insist that the record he left is impressive for its achieved tangibles. They argue that he "set the stage"—the most frequently used phrase—for good things to come in his second term when he presumably would have enjoyed a more compliant Congress. And they set great store in his role as the symbol of America's best hope and instincts.

But his detractors are impatient

with symbolism, imponderables and good intentions. They tend to concentrate on bills enacted, executive orders issued, specific diplomatic moves undertaken. And they feel the drama to be enacted on his stage setting was long overdue.

FOR HISTORIANS, 10 years is no time at all. But Prof. William E. Leuchtenburg of Columbia University, whose special field is recent American history, finds recognizable trends in Kennedy historiography.

"For two or three years after his death," says Leuchtenburg, "the main criticism of his administration was that it was inconsequential. Was he inadequate or was he in office for too brief a time—two years and 10 months—to have made a significant mark? How does one evaluate substance as against style? There has been more attention to the style of Kennedy's presidency than of any other presidency.

"These questions remain with us, but there has been a sharp change. Now the critics are saying it was an important administration but it was malevolent.

"A good deal of the revisionist critique of Kennedy rests on a revisionist approach to the Eisenhower administration. Most historians thought of the Eisenhower period as a time of torpor when critical questions were not attended to. But much of the recent writing sees Eisenhower as a man of peace who kept us out of Vietnam and had a modest view of the presidency and the national state. With the former assessment of Eisenhower as a yardstick, the Kennedy administration looks good. But using the latter assessment, Kennedy can be made to look evil."

TEN YEARS AGO, so cautious and respected an historian as Arthur S. Link, professor of history at Princeton University, recipient of the Bancroft prize for biography, editor of the Woodrow Wilson papers and the country's leading Wilson scholar, compared Kennedy with Wilson as well as with the two Roosevelts.

"It is too early to try to fix his place among the Presidents, but," Link ventured, "I am inclined to believe that historians will rank him as a great President."

Ten years later, very few historians, not even Link, are ready to put him in this rank. Link expresses candidly a change that some others feel:

"My reactions to what I wrote 10 years ago are divided and ambiguous. I wrote under the trauma of the assassination and under the spell of Kennedy's great personal charm and magnetism, and both these facts had their effect at the time. I did not overrate him on these qualities, but I should say I somewhat overrated his vision and his abilities. As we look back on 1961-63, what seemed like great events and forward movement don't seem so great and so forward now."

AND ANOTHER Bancroft prize winner, C. Vann Woodward, professor of history at Yale, would like to wait 100 years for a proper evaluation of Kennedy, but in the meantime he is also assailed by doubts:

"The more I think of the record he left, the cooler I become toward the enthusiasm and approval that existed at the time of his administration.

"Much of the reputation he earned

was based on the promises he made, the expectations he aroused and the sense of tragedy that he didn't live to fulfill them. But his stature was based not on what he did but on what was anticipated of him. These expectations were not realized. Of the things he did do, the further we get from them the

more doubtful they become, the more shocking some of them, especially in foreign policy, seem."

BUT THE REVISIONIST impulse is not all negative. Irving Howe, editor of *Dissent* and a spokesman for the older left, has shifted the basis of his judgment:

"People like myself who have come out of the traditional American left have always underestimated the importance of character in the selection of a President.

"Ten years ago, I pointed out what I think was absolutely true, that Kennedy did not have much of a liberal record, that he hadn't made any claims to being a great liberal.

"I said that in order to counteract some of the excessive encomiums for him, but I think now it was really beside the point. What mattered in terms of public response was not a particular piece of legislation or even the fact that he signed the atom test ban treaty. What mattered was people's sense that there was a man in the presidency who represented something fresh, an effort to get away from the dismalness of Republican administrations and in a way I think now that this popular response had more legitimacy and perception than my sort of formalistic criticism, accurate though it was at that time."

LOOKING BACK, Lewis S. Feuer, professor of sociology at the University of Toronto, finds a similar lesson.

"America's loss of self-confidence began with President Kennedy's death," says Feuer. "He emphasized civil duties as well as civil rights. The troubles on the campuses would have been limited if he had lived; he would not have allowed the universities to become areas of unbridled generational revolt. The Democratic Party would not have become the instrumentality of a corps of 'alienated intellectuals.'"

"With the loss of the concept of civil duties since his death, the country has veered to demagoguery. From left to right, from Weathermen to Watergate-

men, the notion has spread that the end justifies any means."

And Charles Frankel, professor of philosophy and public affairs at Columbia University:

"The randomness of the assassination disoriented our whole culture. Young people, in particular, want and need system in their lives. Kennedy succeeded to a degree in supplying it by evoking the 'civic sense' of the ancient Greeks. That sense became diluted with his death."

HANNAH ARENDT also sees the decade since the assassination as downhill, a process of "subterranean demoralization." But she is convinced that the act was not random, that it has yet to be fully explained, and that failure to do so is a contributing factor in our present condition.

The issue of *Current* magazine which I edited immediately after the assassination contained comments on Kennedy and his presidency from 46 intellectuals. Only one contributor, the youngest, Sanford A. Lakoff, then assistant professor of government at Harvard, mentioned Vietnam. And it was a mere mention. "The war contin-

ues in Vietnam," he noted in a list of problems the country faced.

Yet Vietnam became the focus of the sharpest controversy over Kennedy's intentions and the basis of the strongest denunciations of him.

Hans J. Morgenthau, an elder of American foreign policy studies, now distinguished professor at the City College of the City University of New York, is categorical:

"Kennedy increased the number of our 'advisers' from 600 to 14,000. Under his administration we would have gotten as deeply into Vietnam as we did under Johnson's. Kennedy might have gotten out earlier because he didn't have the psychological hangups that Johnson had. But the essentials of the policy were not decisively influenced by the assassination. The difference lies in the different personalities."

OTHERS THINK the personality differences might have had a stronger effect.

John P. Lewis, dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Affairs at Princeton, puts it this way:

"The difference between some sort of sense of proportion in Kennedy and the excessive exuberance with which

Johnson approached things would have made a perceptible difference in degree which might have been quite important in Vietnam. Kennedy might have been more restrained and, as it turned out, this might have had important consequences."

Fritz Stern, professor of history at

Columbia University, expresses it another way:

"Kennedy would not have pursued a war that would deeply divide the nation and the nation from its allies. He had a deeper sense of history than his successors and at a certain point he would have weighed the factors and decided that the loss of unity was a more serious matter than an unsatisfactory solution in Vietnam."

AN ANALYSIS with Marxist overtones of Kennedy's Vietnam policy comes from Barton J. Bernstein, associate professor of history at Stanford and one of the younger revisionists:

"There is no direct evidence that Kennedy would not have continued escalating in Vietnam. He had really initiated American armed involvement, for Eisenhower's token force were really advisers, and Kennedy was not prepared to back out or to watch South Vietnam go Communist."

"It was not simply that he had some fears of a domestic backlash but primarily that he regarded South Vietnam as important or essential to the international capitalist system."

"Like others then, he did believe in the 'domino' theory in its various forms: one fallen state might, through taint, proximity, encouragement of subversion or revolution, or by its removal from the larger capitalist system, lead to revolutions and overthrows elsewhere and the further weakening of the system. By this analysis, communism had to be stopped, the status quo maintained, and wars of national liberation thwarted or defeated. Vietnam was a test case."

TEN YEARS AGO, Richard H. Rovere, Washington correspond-

ent for the New Yorker, wrote a laudatory obituary of Kennedy for which he has no apologies except in the matter of Vietnam:

"I think I went wrong, or largely wrong, in two places. I mentioned the Bay of Pigs and concluded that he had learned enough from that experience

never to have a similar one. But then he escalated the war in Vietnam and unquestionably bore some responsibility for what Johnson and Nixon later did."

"I sometimes think that affair would have gone along about as it did even if he had lived and served a second term; at other times, I think that at some point he would have seen the horror of it and found—I can hardly speculate on the means—a way of ending it while he was still President. But I was plainly in error in saying that his education in such matters ended with the Bay of Pigs and in making no mention of Vietnam."

OTHER SPECIFIC aspects of Kennedy's foreign policy arouse less controversy.

The Bay of Pigs blunder is universally condemned. His handling of the Cuban missile crisis has been applauded as a triumph but the revisionist suspicion that he over-reacted is gaining ground. "He did not exhaust the resources of diplomacy before bringing the country to the brink of war," Arthur Link contends.

Almost nobody has a kind word for the Alliance for Progress. Hans Morgenthau's comment is harsh but not untypical: "The idea that you can re-

form backward economies through the instrumentality of governments that have a vital interest in the status quo is of course infantile."

THE BAN ON nuclear testing in the atmosphere was and continues to be perhaps the most widely hailed single achievement of the Kennedy administration. But there are also reservations. David Riesman, professor in the department of social relations at Harvard, thinks that the ban is responsible for wiping out people's concern about nuclear arms buildups. The proliferation of nuclear weapons is still the gravest danger facing the human race, he believes, but there is now very little public pressure to stop it. And I. F. Stone points out that the limited ban was followed by intensified underground testing and acceleration of the nuclear arms race.

AMONG INTELLECTUALS, almost without exception, detente with the Communist world is regarded as highly desirable. Many credit Kennedy with a growing interest in detente and find evidence for this in his American University speech on June 11, 1963, which was generally interpreted as the begin-

ning or a cautious reappraisal of Soviet-U.S. relations.

Irving Howe, for one, thinks Kennedy would not have perpetuated the Cold War:

"Because Kennedy was open to ideas, I think it is reasonable to speculate that he would have learned from the Bay of Pigs experience. He would have seen something like this—that containment, the essential American foreign policy after the second World War, was by and large necessary and by and large had served its purpose, which was to prevent

Communist seizures of power in Western Europe.

"What happened is that containment had become an almost habitual response in the State Department toward all countries. But what had worked in Europe where you have advanced economies, powerful trade unions, socialist movements and a democratic tradition, clearly was not going to work in the so-called underdeveloped countries. The Cuban invasion represented in some sense an automatic and mindless continuation of the containment policy. And of course it failed.

"In the country at large the political and intellectual consequences of that failure were not seriously thought through. The presumption is that if Kennedy had remained in office, with his generally moderate liberal slant, he would have been capable of enough flexibility and intelligence to invoke a major reconsideration of this automatic transposition of the containment policy from a context where it worked to a context where it did not."

ANOTHER SCHOOL of thought is in no doubt about Kennedy's determination to move toward detente. It includes Louis J. Halle, professor at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, now on leave as director of the Research Institute on Communist Affairs at Columbia University. What concerns these men is the manner in which detente is now being pursued.

Ten years ago, Halle's favorable judgment of the Kennedy administra-

tion was based, to a large degree, on its development of relations with the Soviet Union in the context of the Cold War.

"Ten years later," he writes, "one may note the parallel between Kennedy's achievement in establishing an understanding with Russia and President Nixon's in opening the way to an understanding with China. Having noted it, however, all that remains is contrast.

"The symbolic function of the presidential office is not less important, in the long run, than its executive function. The public figure who fills it is required to represent our American society in the dignity of its historic tradition and the nobility of its aspiration. When this function of leadership is fulfilled, the society, feeling itself to be what its leader represents, tends to rise to that level.

"Under President Kennedy it still felt its own stature. But President Nixon has, from the beginning, shown himself blind to the dignity of his office, and in his symbolic capacity he has come, at last, to represent something like the Fall of Man. It is as if he had robbed our society of the virtue Kennedy symbolized, thereby depriving it of moral authority, not only in the eyes of the world but, what is more important, in its own eyes. Today one looks back with nostalgia to a President who, despite his early blunder at the Bay of Pigs, did not fail to uphold our honorable character as a nation."

And Brzezinski:

"I said 10 years ago that Kennedy's death is a great loss to the United States from an international point of view because Kennedy was a true global leader, who in many ways personalized the hopes and the aspirations of the younger generation.

"His absence is well demonstrated by the way in which the present de-

controversy. On civil rights, for example, what some see as unnecessary timidity others insist was essential consensus-building. A view that will be generally accepted as authoritative is expressed by John Hope Franklin, professor of history at the University of Chicago:

"The historical kind of activist would think of Kennedy almost as an obstructionist; whatever he did would be regarded as so minimal as to be unimportant. But one cannot apply the standards of 1973 to 1963. Of course he compromised. And his tangible achievements were not numerous. But his statements and his general stance toward Negroes were all positive. Style is very important here because it can create an atmosphere in which things happen.

"There are only three Presidents since the Civil War who have been important in the area of civil rights—Truman, Kennedy and Johnson. Truman broke through the thick crust of indifference. Kennedy set the stage for action. Johnson supplied the action. If I had to rank them in importance, Kennedy would be third."

IN COMMENTING on the assassination 10 years ago, Carl N. Degler, professor of history at Stanford, suggested that Americans expected "such monstrous acts elsewhere, but not in America, where goodness reigns as the essential ingredient in their democracy. Even now, in the last half of the 20th Century, American innocence has not yet come to an end." Today he finds a different meaning in the events of Nov. 22, 1963.

"The actual events that make up the past do not, of course, change. What took place in the past happened, whether historians report it or not. But the meaning of the past does change; in fact, it is always changing for us who have lived beyond it, just as our meaning will no longer be adequate for those who come after us. There is, in short, no final meaning to history; there are only meanings.

"Thus the meaning of Kennedy's assassination that one perceived in 1963 is true enough in 1973, but today it

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tente policy is pursued. Under Kennedy, an East-West detente meant also an increasing sense of shared ideals, with many in the Communist countries looking toward us for inspiration. Detente today, instead, is a conservative balance of power arrangement, devoid of any moral content. As a consequence, some portions of the American public are outraged and many of those living in the Communist countries are disillusioned. One can only wonder whether a detente which operates in a spiritual void can be truly enduring."

THE EFFECT of the Kennedy administration on the country's domestic problems is also a matter of

also has another meaning, one shaped and informed by subsequent events. For if, in 1963, in the light of previous assassinations of Presidents, the killing of John Fitzgerald Kennedy seemed a new sign of Americans' deep belief in their innocence, today, after two more assassinations, the Vietnam war, the withdrawal of Johnson and the emasculation of Nixon, there is another meaning that attaches to the events of Nov. 22, 1963. That date now marks the beginning of America's Time of Troubles — a period not uncommon in the history of other peoples, but without analogy in the now almost 200-year history of Americans.

"All of the events that make these last 10 years troublous are not as neatly connected as the elements in the story of the House that Jack Built but the analogy is still apt. When John F. Kennedy died in Dallas the beginnings of the Vietnam war had already been laid: United States troops were there and the principle of holding the line in Asia had been enunciated. That beginning was carried to its logical, if

not its intended, conclusion by Lyndon Johnson, whose withdrawal from public life was his personal cost; the end of his domestic vision and program was the nation's.

"It was the war, too, that brought Richard Nixon his most vehement opposition as he sought to end the war without seeming to lose it. Further, it was out of Nixon's need for vindication of his course in regard to the war that came the massive effort at re-election, of which Watergate and its 'horrors' was the cost to him and to the nation."

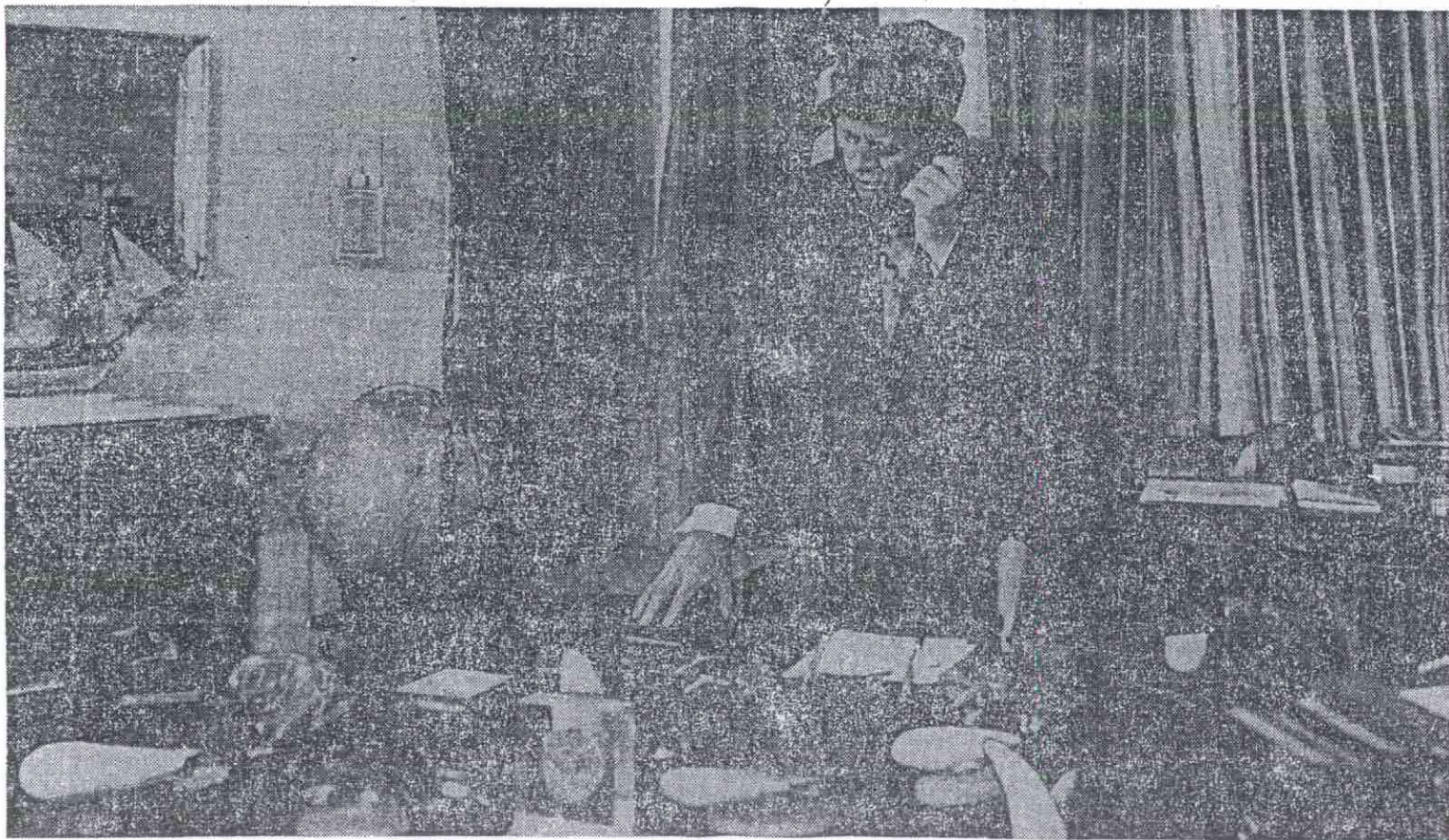
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THE ACHIEVEMENT of a consensus on Kennedy's place in history seems remote.

To Henry F. Graff, professor of history at Columbia, Kennedy's impact — not as a President, but as the ideal American — will be strong. "His is a major transitional figure," says Graff. "Washington was our first ideal American. Not until Lincoln was the democratic image updated. Now Kennedy emerges as the new ideal American. America likes his style. He has legitimized many hitherto unseen aspects of our society. We will see this legacy more clearly in another generation."

I. F. Stone remains unimpressed.

"Ten years ago I correctly characterized Kennedy as a conservative in the good sense who moved ever so slightly in the right direction. But by now he is simply an optical illusion."



White House, Oct. 1, 1963—National Archives photo